

Olympia Arena (Olympia Stadium)  
5920 Grand River Avenue  
Detroit  
Wayne County  
Michigan

HABS No. MI-252

HABS  
MICH,  
82-DETRO,  
25-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

OLYMPIA ARENA (Olympia Stadium) HABS No. MI-252

Location: 5920 Grand River Avenue  
Detroit, Michigan 48208  
USGS Detroit, Michigan, Quadrangle  
UTM Coordinates: 17.327000.4691000

Date of  
Construction: 1927, with addition in 1965.

Present Owner: City of Detroit, Michigan

Present Occupant: Vacant

Significance: From its opening in October, 1927, until its closing in December, 1979, Olympia Arena was Detroit's principal indoor arena for sporting events, including professional hockey and basketball games, track meets, boxing matches, and bicycle races. The building hosted other forms of mass entertainment, including ice shows, the circus, rodeos, and rock concerts. Over its long history, Olympia was the center for political and social conventions, trade shows, expositions, and various other attractions and events. It is best remembered as the home of the Detroit Red Wings. Designed by C. Howard Crane, an internationally known theater architect, Olympia Arena is a Detroit landmark because of its handsome Romanesque exterior and its imposing size. It is an engineering monument as well, because it contained the largest indoor skating rink in the United States when it opened in 1927.

Project  
Information: This documentation was undertaken in May and June, 1986 in accordance with an agreement between the City of Detroit, the State Historic Preservation Office, and the National Park Service as a mitigative measure prior to building demolition.

Charles K. Hyde  
Associate Professor of History  
Wayne State University  
Detroit, Michigan 48202

## PART I - HISTORY OF THE OLYMPIA ARENA

Olympia Arena was constructed on Grand River Avenue at McGraw Avenue, approximately three miles from the center of Detroit's Central Business District of the early 1920s. This area remained undeveloped until the mid-1880s, but by 1890, a large farmhouse stood at 1420 Grand River Avenue, the parcel which became 5912 Grand River Avenue in 1921. In 1890, James D. Scovel, a partner in Scovel Brothers, seed growers, occupied the house and operated a seed farm. By the late 1890s, a large brick farmhouse and three modest frame houses stood on the property. By 1910, the farmhouse fronting on Grand River Avenue was still standing, but the remaining land between McGraw and Hooker Avenues to the north was subdivided into building lots, with fifteen frame houses fronting on McGraw and Hooker, a dozen vacant lots, and an alley between them. A five unit apartment house, "The Barton," fronted on Lawton Avenue. A real estate atlas prepared in 1923 shows a well-developed residential neighborhood, with 26 houses between Hooker and McGraw. The area north of Hooker was also fully-developed as a subdivision.<sup>1</sup>

This was an excellent location for a sports arena because Grand River Avenue was a major surface street extending in a northwesterly direction from downtown Detroit and both Grand River and McGraw had major arterial lines of the electric streetcar system. A syndicate of Detroit businessmen established the Detroit Hockey Club, Inc., started site preparation for a new stadium in the summer of 1926, and then purchased a National Hockey League Franchise on 25 September 1926. The building permit for Olympia was issued on 3 February 1927 to the Detroit Hockey Club and A.A. Scovel, "to erect a brick and concrete sports arena" valued at \$1,259,300.<sup>2</sup>

Charles Howard Crane, who designed Olympia Arena, was one of the premier theater architects in the United States in the twentieth century. Born in Hartford, Connecticut in 1885, he completed public high school there and in 1903-04, he began his active career as a draftsman with the Connecticut-based firm of Bayley & Goodrich. He moved to Detroit in 1905 and initially worked in the offices of Albert Kahn and the firm of Smith, Hinchman & Grylls. Crane launched an independent practice in 1909 and quickly earned a reputation as a specialist in the design of theaters, particularly motion picture theaters. By the late 1930s, his firm also established an office in London, where he worked from 1934 to 1938 designing Earl's Court and permanent exhibition buildings.

Crane's architectural career reflected the emergence of mass consumer entertainment in the early twentieth century. He built numerous theaters as well as auditoriums and stadiums for enterprising businessmen who capitalized on the era's seemingly limitless demand for movies, rodeos, track meets, team sports, and other forms of entertainment. Detroit's first theater district, hosting vaudeville, burlesque shows, and the novel silent motion pictures, was on Monroe Street, where the city's first movie theater, the CASINO, opened in 1905. Crane's earliest theater, the PALACE (ca. 1914) was built on Monroe. His MADISON THEATER (1916) in Detroit's booming Grand Circus Park entertainment district, firmly established his reputation as a designer of movie theaters. According to W. Hawkins Ferry, "no architect did more to promote the development of the movie theater than C. Howard Crane."<sup>3</sup> By the end of his career, Crane had completed 250 theaters in the United States and Canada, with more than 50 in Detroit alone.<sup>4</sup>

Detroit's movie theaters of the 1910s typically borrowed from traditional architectural styles, especially the Italian Renaissance. In the 1920s, however, exotic and bizarre forms of architecture found their way into the elegant fantasy world of the movie palace. Architects such as Crane, working in unison with interior designers, utilized Middle Eastern, Asian, and Latin American styles to give the buildings a "make believe" atmosphere. Crane built several of his most important movie theaters in the Grand Circus Park district; the CAPITAL THEATER (1922), the STATE THEATER (1925); the UNITED ARTISTS THEATER (1928); and his most famous, the FOX THEATER (1928) on Woodward Avenue. The FOX THEATER opened in September, 1928, with a seating capacity of 5,000. The palatial structure has a vast auditorium unobstructed by columns and it drew upon Burmese, Hindu, Persian, and Chinese art for design inspiration. While Crane's work as an architect was primarily in the entertainment field, not all of his projects were motion picture theaters. One of his earliest major commissions was for ORCHESTRA HALL (1919), the home of the Detroit Symphony until 1955.<sup>5</sup>

The Olympia Arena is perhaps the least-known of Crane's major works. Like other entertainment facilities Crane designed, Olympia was massive by the standards of the day. In purely architectural terms, Olympia was far less wondrous and fanciful than other public structures of the late 1920s, including Crane's theaters. To some extent, the buff, red, and green colors originally used on the interior contrasted with the rather ordinary-looking, dark-red brick and brown terra cotta trimmings of the Romanesque exterior. Olympia's

significance, according to Crane himself, lay in the area of engineering, notably in the elaborate refrigeration system that made Olympia Arena the largest ice-skating rink in the United States at the time it opened, with an ice surface measuring 110 feet wide and 242 feet in length.

Well before the Olympia Arena was constructed, the Detroit Hockey Club bought the Victoria Cougars of the Western Canada League, moved the team to Detroit, and renamed them the Detroit Cougars. On 18 November 1926, the Cougars played the first NHL game, a 2-0 loss to the Boston Bruins. The Detroit team played its home games at the Border City Arena in Windsor, Ontario, during this initial season. The loyal Cougar fans had to ride a ferry across the Detroit River in winter, then take taxis to the "home" ice in Windsor, and repeat this ordeal after the game. Their efforts went unrewarded, for Detroit won only 12 of 44 games, and finished dead last in the standings. Two important changes were evident during the 1927-28 season - Olympia Stadium was finished and became the home of the Cougars, and Jack Adams began his illustrious 35-year coaching career in Detroit. After losing the initial hockey game at Olympia on 22 November 1927 to the Ottawa Senators, Detroit finished in fourth place in the league, with a .500 record. The team changed its name to the Detroit Falcons for the 1930-31 season, but this brought no improvement in the team's performance.

The Olympia Arena was built mainly to serve as the home for Detroit's professional hockey team. At the laying of the cornerstone on 8 March 1927, Frank Calder, President of the National Hockey League, was one of a handful of dignitaries present, including Detroit's mayor, John Smith. Still, the earliest events at Olympia featured many other types of entertainment. Olympia's official formal opening was on 17 October 1927, while the first major event was a Boy Scout Day program of 22 October 1927, featuring "The March of the Flags," a U.S. Navy Band concert, and the International Cowboy Rodeo Championships.<sup>6</sup> Professional boxing was a major attraction as well. On 26 October 1927, Tom Heeney, a New Zealand heavyweight, won a ten-round decision over Johnny Riako of Cleveland, before a packed house of 17,000 spectators. Two weeks later, "Tiger" Flowers and Maxie Rosenbloom, two middleweights, fought to a draw. Starting on 12 November 1927, Olympia was the scene of a six day bicycle race.<sup>7</sup> Conventions were also an important part of Olympia's history. One of the earliest was the national convention of the American Legion, held in Detroit for five days beginning 21 September 1931. President Harbort Hoover addressed the delegates at Olympia at their opening session.<sup>8</sup> Through the rest of the building's

long life, it remained a center for various types of mass entertainment, including the Ice Capades and other ice shows, and increasingly in the 1960s and 1970s, for rock concerts.

During the early years of the Depression, the Detroit Hockey Club suffered substantial losses and on 28 April 1932, the Union Guardian Trust Company, trustee, filed a notice of default on mortgage payments against the Detroit Hockey Club and Angia Scovel. On 28 July 1933, the Detroit Hockey Club was ordered to pay a sum of \$776,770 by the middle of August or face the sale of the premises. The mortgage was foreclosed on 4 November and the Union Guardian Trust Company was granted a trustee deed for the property. Later in November 1933, James Norris, a Chicago industrialist, purchased the arena property as well as the team, which he renamed the "Red Wings," with the winged wheel as its insignia.<sup>9</sup> Detroit won the league championship in the 1933-34 season, the start of a long history of hockey success achieved by the combination of Jack Adams and the Norris family.<sup>10</sup>

Olympia underwent no substantial structural changes during the first forty years of operation. In 1965, a major addition was made to the northeast (back) side of Olympia, primarily to increase the arena's capacity by 1,800 seats. The addition consisted of a steel-framed four-story segment measuring 236 feet 9 inches long, 81 feet 10 inches wide, and 98 feet 6 inches high. The building permit indicated an estimated cost of \$1 million, but the overall cost of this project was roughly \$2 million. The 1965 rehabilitation was already underway by the time of the official groundbreaking ceremony on 23 June 1965, attended by Detroit Mayor Jerome Cavanaugh and Sid Abel, the General Manager of the Detroit Hockey Club. This work, completed in time for the start of the 1965-66 hockey season, included the installation of 13,000 seats, at a cost of \$23 each, new boards, and new timeclocks.<sup>11</sup> In the summer of 1967, the piping system which carried the brine to cool the water to produce the ice surface was replaced.<sup>12</sup> Private box seats were added in the early 1970s, but there were no other major changes in the building.

The deterioration of the nearby neighborhood more than the condition of the building led to a decision to replace Olympia. Suburban sites were considered, but the Detroit Hockey Club finally moved to the new city-owned Joe Louis Arena on Detroit's riverfront in December, 1979. The Red Wings played their last game at Olympia on 15 December 1979, a 4-4 tie with the Quebec Nordiques. An old-timers game was played there on 22 February 1980, the last event of any kind held at Olympia Arena.<sup>13</sup> The Norris Grain Company, a Nevada Corporation, then

sold the building and land to the City of Detroit on 17 March 1981 for \$373,513, ending a long period of Norris family ownership.<sup>14</sup>

## PART II - DESCRIPTION OF THE OLYMPIA ARENA

Olympia Arena is a polygonal, six-sided, steel and reinforced concrete building located on Grand River Avenue between McGraw and Hooker, south of West Grand Boulevard. As originally built, three of the sides, facing Grand River Avenue, McGraw, and Lawton, were 173 feet, 317 feet, and 224 feet in length respectively. The north wall originally had three segments, which, proceeding from west to east, were 140 feet, 117 feet, and 145 feet long. The 1965 addition to the east end of the building, facing Lawton, was 224 feet long and 81 feet wide. The front of the building from grade level to the top of the pediment is 107 feet high.

On the interior, the main steel roof trusses, built by the Massillon Bridge and Structural Company of Massillon, Ohio, have a span of 186 feet and are 90 feet above the arena floor. Olympia Arena has five distinct levels: the ground-floor arena level; a mezzanine; the main seating section; the balcony seating section; and a fifth section containing the roof supports. When originally built, Olympia enclosed 7.3 million cubic feet and provided a floor space of 77,393 square feet. Underneath the oval ice-skating rink measuring 242 feet long and 110 feet wide, was a labyrinth of 74,880 feet of 1 1/4 inch pipe, placed four inches apart, center-to-center, which carried the brine coolant to create the ice surface. A layer of concrete covered the pipes. The center of the basement housed brine coolers and pumps to move the brine throughout the piping system.<sup>15</sup>

The style of the exterior of Olympia is Romanesque in derivation. Overall, the building appears heavy and fortress-like, weighed down by the massive use of dark red brick which is relieved occasionally by brown buff terra cotta trimmings. The main facade along Grand River Avenue is symmetrically arranged and is the most decorative of the facades. A course of denticulated brick, bordered with stone, surrounds the entire structure at the mezzanine level, setting off the entrance section from the remainder of the building. Although now boarded up, the entrance level was designed to accommodate up to thirteen retail stores along Grand River and McGraw, with passageways only to the outside. A three-sided marquee stands above the Grand River entrance, with the letters "OLYMPIA" in the middle. Above the marquee, two original steel flag poles protrude from the facade on a 45 degree angle. Other features

include two large neon OLYMPIA signs on the Grand River and McGraw facades, at the intersection of the two streets. These signs date from the 1950s and replaced a 60 foot high vertical neon sign which was also on the Grand River facade, but which extended about ten feet over the sidewalk.

Immediately above the lower-level course line, nine steel-cased, square and rectangular windows stretch along the Grand River facade. The window spaces function as the first stages of a series of elongated, Romanesque-like arches, each filled with denticulated brick and outlined by a border of 8 inch brick, that extend more than half way up the building, corresponding to the main seating and balcony seating levels on the interior. A series of two windows and three stylized arches also appear on the Hooker and McGraw facades, near the front of the building. Prominently displayed in the center of the Grand River facade, in the middle of a series of stylized arches, is a large and deeply-recessed arch, which currently displays a Detroit Red Wings logo, painted on a wooden background. The archway was originally filled with black glass. Briefly interrupting the solid brick work in the space between the series of arches and the cornice are three terracotta medallions which feature hockey players and runners. Two additional examples of medallions with runners can be seen on the McGraw and Hooker facades.

The Grand River facade culminates in a pediment, corresponding to the crest in the gable-shaped roof. The architect described the roof as light-weight and made of "I-plate construction covered with two thicknesses of insulation and an asbestos roof."<sup>16</sup> Originally, three steel flag poles rose vertically from the roof, one of them from the center of the pediment. A cornice follows the pediment and continues along the roof line of the entire building. Composed of dentils and moldings, the cornice is separated from the rest of the building by its light terracotta composition. Blind arcading, appearing only on the building below the pediment and cornice, gives an added decorative touch to the Grand River side.

Except for the course line and cornice extending the length of McGraw and Hooker, and short segments toward Grand River which contain medallions, windows, and arches, the McGraw and Hooker facades are large and relatively unadorned surfaces, broken occasionally by very noticeable air vents and by two entrances on each side. Faintly detectable along the McGraw and Hooker facades are large rectangular areas outlined with eight inch brick that project one half inch. The rectangular, concrete and steel four-story addition made to the rear of the building in 1965 stands sharply apart from the rest of Olympia.



OLYMPIA ARENA  
(Olympia Stadium)  
HABS No. MI-252 (Page 8)

1Sanborn Maps of 1897, 1910, Baist Map of 1923. The area between McGraw and Hooker was called Elfbrink's Subdivision and the area north of Hooker was Ingeraoll's Subdivision.

2City of Detroit, Building Permits Microfilm and Index, Permit No. 24157, issued 3 February 1927.

3W. Hawkins Ferry, The Buildings of Detroit: A History (Detroit, 1980), pp. 323.

4Information on Crane's career is from Ferry, The Buildings of Detroit, pp. 323-326, 136; A.N. Marquis, The Book of Detroiters (Chicago, 1914), p. 129; and Who's Who in America, Vol. 20 (1938-39), p. 649.

5George B. Catlin, The Story of Detroit (Detroit, 1923), pp. 698-704.

6Detroit Olympia Company, Boy Scout Day. Souvenir Program, October 22, 1927 (Detroit, 1927).

7Olympia Stadium, Official Program and Guide (Detroit, 1927).

8Photo Collections, Burton Historical Collections, Detroit Public Library, Conventions/American Legion/ 1931.

9City of Detroit, Land Tract Index, Book No. 411-A, Liber 11, Plat 98.

10Detroit Red Wings, 1979-1980 Facts Book, p. 2; Detroit Free Press, 3 June 1986, p. 3D.

11City of Detroit, Building Permits Microfilm and Index, Permit No. 73536, 13 August 1965 and the Detroit Free Press, 24 October 1965.

12Beltemp Ice Rink News Photo, "New Pipes - Summer 1967," held by the Detroit Hockey Club, Joe Louis Arena, Detroit, Michigan.

13Detroit Free Press, 3 June 1986, p. 3D.

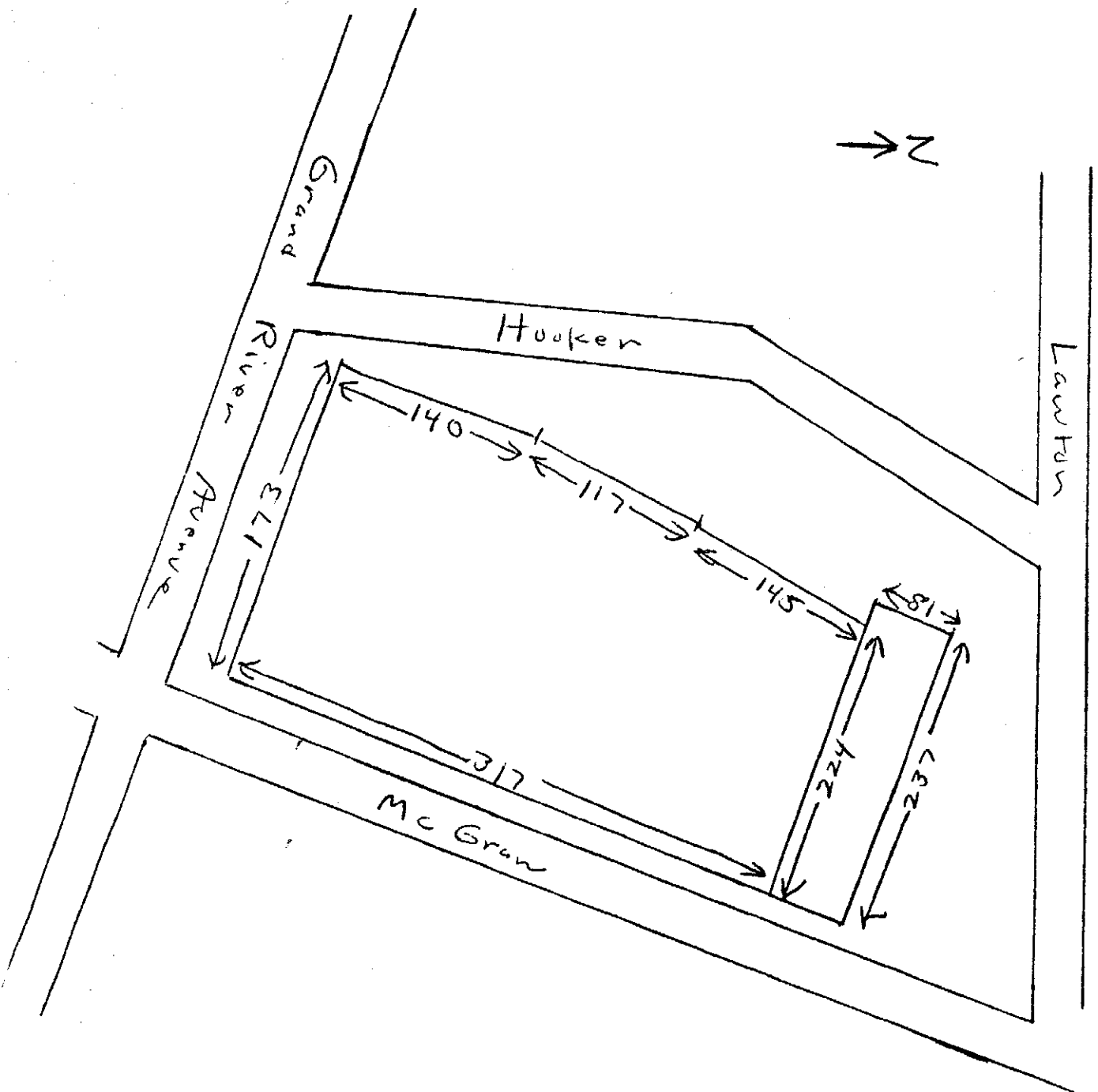
14City of Detroit, Land Tract Index, Book No. 411-A, Liber 11, Plat 98.

OLYMPIA ARENA  
(Olympia Stadium)  
HABS No. MI-252 (Page 9)

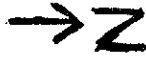
<sup>15</sup>Terry Mitchell, M.E., "Largest Indoor Skating Rink in the United States Installed in Olympia Arena, Detroit," The American Architect, May 20, 1928, pp. 689-696.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 690.

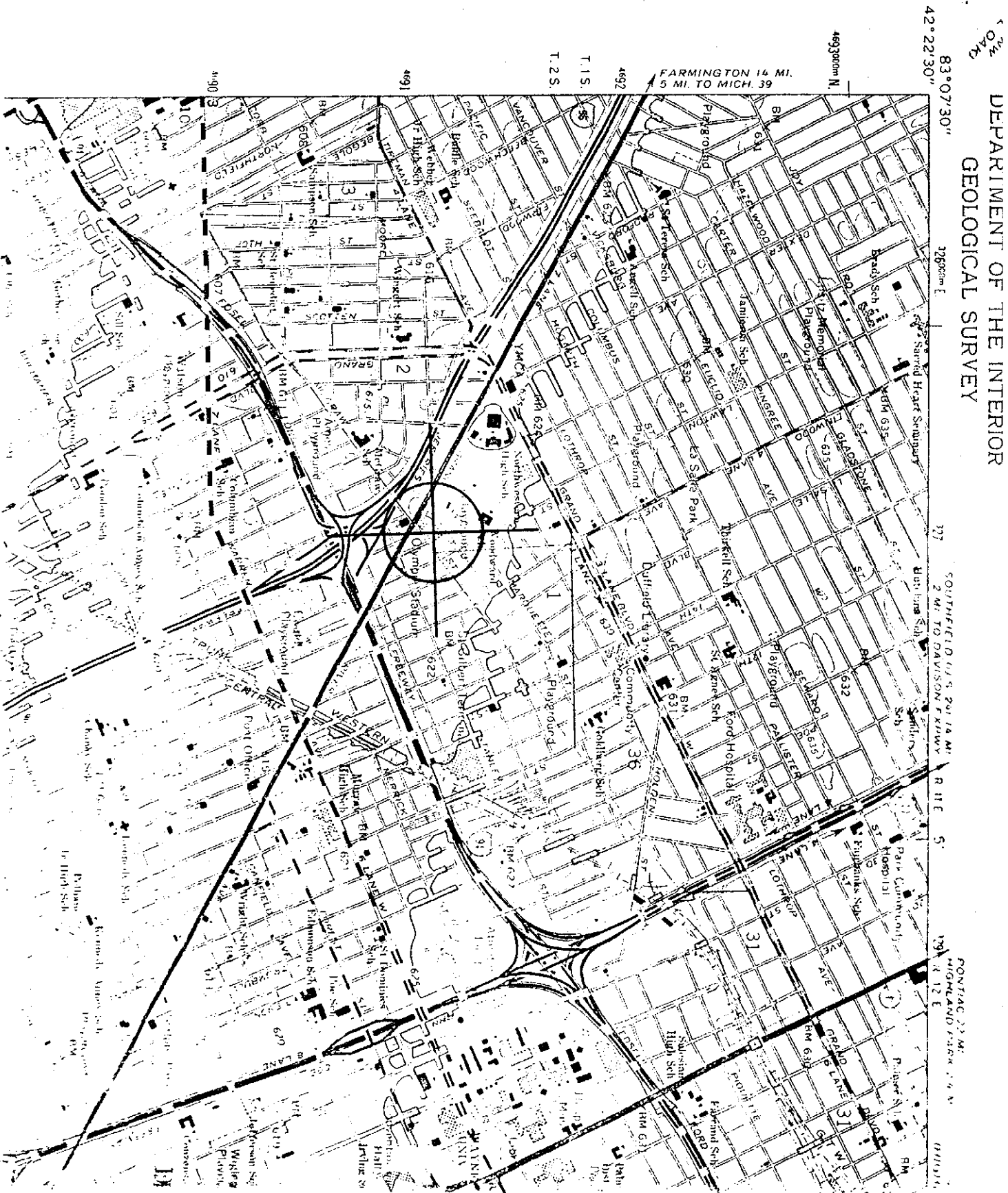
SKETCH OF BUILDING ALIGNMENT AND NEARBY STREETS, 19 June 1986



OLYMPIA ARENA  
(Olympia Stadium)  
HABS No. MI-252 (Page 10)



Detroit, Michigan Quadrangle  
UTM: 17.327000.4691000



SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Baist, George William. Baist's Real Estate Atlas of Surveys of Detroit, Michigan. Philadelphia, 1923. Volume II.

Burton Historical Collections, Detroit Public Library.  
Historical Photograph Collections include approximately fifteen photographs showing various events held at Olympia. None of these are available for photocopying.

Catlin, George B. The Story of Detroit. Detroit, 1923.

Detroit, City of. Building Permits Microfilm and Index,  
Department of Building and Safety Engineering, City-County Building, Detroit, Michigan.

-----. Land Tract Index, Book No. 411-A, Liber 11, Plat 98.

Detroit Free Press, 3 June 1986, p. 3 D.

Detroit Hockey Club. Detroit Red Wings 1979-1980 Facts Book. Detroit, 1979.

-----. Photo collection of approximately 60 photographs relating to Olympia Arena, located in the Detroit Hockey Club offices in Joe Louis Arena, Detroit, Michigan.

Detroit Olympia Company. Boy Scout Day Souvenir Program, October 22, 1927. Detroit, 1927. Burton Historical Collections.

Ferry, W. Hawkins. The Buildings of Detroit: A History. Detroit, 1980.

Marquis, Albert Nelson, editor. The Book of Detroiters: A Biographical Dictionary of Leading Living Men of the City of Detroit. Chicago, 1914.

Olympia Stadium. Official Program and Guide. Detroit, 1927. Burton Historical Collections.

Mitchell, Terry. "Largest Indoor Skating Rink in the United States Installed in Olympia Arena, Detroit," The American Architect, May 20, 1928, pp. 689-696.

Sanborn Map and Publishing Company. Insurance Maps of Detroit, Michigan. New York, 1897 and 1910.